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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINORITIES WORKING GROUP AIMS TO ADDRESS
PROBLEMS OF ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. Challenges and obstacles facing the ethnic and religious minority populations in Iraq include political intimidation, discrimination in employment (especially in the public sector), inferior provision of public services, and neglect of cultural heritage (e.g. lack of protection or respect for churches or cemeteries). To address these problems and determine what more the USG and GOI can be doing to ameliorate them, we have formed a Minorities Working Group with representatives from the Embassy and MNF-I. We look forward to working with Washington counterparts to develop a broad strategy for protecting the rich ethnic and religious character of Iraq.

12. (C) A number of USG-funded programs currently provide assistance to the minority populations in northern Iraq, where many, particularly Christian, minorities are concentrated. USAID's Community Action Program (CAP) and Tijara Program (provincial economic growth) in the Ninewa province provide funding for economic revitalization projects, including micro-loans for small businesses, and serve as links between communities and their governments. Although USAID's assistance to Ninewa Province is not targeted specifically to minorities, it disproportionately benefits Christians because they happen to live in safer areas of the province that are easier to operate in. PRT Ninewa has provided almost a quarter of a million dollars of in-kind assistance (in this case, Iraqi-built tractors) to boost the economic potential of multi-ethnic farm associations representing farmers from the various Christian, Yezidi, Shabak, Kurdish, and Sunni Arab communities. The PRT is also encouraging the Chaldean and Assyrian communities to submit proposals for USG funding under a variety of programs, and is working with community leaders and organizations to develop such initiatives. However, PRT Ninewa also reports that Christian leaders in the area have made it clear that supporting Christians directly does not help them live in harmony with their many neighbors. They want help, but are sensitive to local perceptions of favoritism that could backfire on them. Thus the PRT focuses on using USG resources to help all minority groups in the region find cooperative solutions to their shared problems.

13. (C) The USG-funded National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI) provide a variety of civic and political activism training activities to minority groups in Iraq. Since 2005, NDI has conducted campaign training for 440 representatives of the Assyrian Democratic Movement; IRI provides political party development training to a number of Christian-based political parties. IRI has worked with Christian civic organizations since 2005 to train them to advocate effectively for their rights and teach them to promote tolerance in multi-ethnic/religious societies. IRI is currently working on a nationwide effort with Iraqi activists to reform the Iraqi national identity card that all Iraqis must carry and which identifies the bearer's religion, and thus is sometimes used a discriminatory tool.

¶4. (C) There are a number of potential areas to explore for addressing the issues confronting Iraqi minorities. On the political front, one possibility is to encourage PM Maliki to use the momentum created by his crackdown on the militias in Basrah to further demonstrate that he is the Prime Minister of all Iraqis, not just the Shia, by making a statement promoting tolerance and equality for all religions and ethnicities in Iraq. (Note: As a good start to this, Maliki's office issued a press release on May 17 in which Maliki praises the Christian minority as an integral part of Iraq and urges all minorities to help defend Iraq. End Note.) Equally, the KRG leadership could be encouraged to make similar statements and take action to stop discrimination against minorities by the lower-level KRG bureaucracy, some Kurdish citizens and Kurdish political, military and intelligence officials operating outside the KRG. Minorities and provincial officials could be encouraged to work together on programs that bring minorities into national security institutions, such as a current effort in Ninewa province to recruit 700 Christians into the Iraqi police.

¶5. (C) The Minorities Working Group will continue to meet regularly in order to track issues of concern to Iraq's minority populations, and to develop recommendations to assist them and reassure Iraq's religious and ethnic minorities that they have a secure and prosperous future here.

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